

Exercise Tests Region's Ability to Respond To Infectious Disease Outbreak

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Local health departments in the Central Kansas Region for Emergency Preparedness participated in an exercise to test their ability to respond to an outbreak of an infectious disease. The Public Health Investigation: Infectious Disease Exercise (PHI) was conducted during February. The Central Kansas Region is comprised of local health departments in Barton, McPherson, Pawnee, Rice, Saline, and Stafford Counties.

KDHE's Office of Local and Rural Health, and Bureau of Epidemiology and Disease Prevention designed the exercise, in partnership with the Kansas Association of Local Health Departments. The University of Kansas School of Medicine-Wichita, along with Saint Louis University, Heartland Centers for Public Health Workforce Development /Bioterrorism Preparedness assisted with the evaluation.

"We appreciate the Central Kansas Region's willingness to participate in this pilot exercise. Through their efforts and support, we have been able to develop new partnerships and collaboration to improve disease investigation and public health preparedness in Kansas," said Debbie Nickels, exercise facilitator. "Lessons learned during this pilot exercise will be used to improve and fine tune future exercises."

The local health departments participated in the exercise from their local offices in coordination with their state and regional partners. The intent of the exercise was to test participants' knowledge of local health infectious disease protocols, surge capacity, coordination, and risk communication plans.

The pilot exercise, which dealt with an outbreak of an infectious disease scenario, included regular updates through the Kansas Public Health Information eXchange (PHIX). The exercise designers incorporated core public health competencies to improve development of local, regional, and state public health workers' knowledge and ability to meet public health and preparedness response capacity. Participants also used PHIX and conference calls to communicate with each other.

Mary Beth Herrmann, Pawnee County Health Department Administrator said, "the public health investigation exercise afforded my department and our regional health department partners the opportunity to practice procedures and utilize some tools which we have acquired over the past several years with our hazard preparedness funding and training. It also helped us to determine some areas where we need to do some continued development. I know for my department it was a good learning experience. The exercise was a good example of how we have to think outside of our county borders when it comes to infectious and communicable diseases, which know no boundaries."

The exercise is still being evaluated at this time, and results will be published when the evaluation process is completed. Various, similar training exercises will be conducted in the future across the state. Through the use of electronic media, local, regional and state public health workers, in coordination with their preparedness partners, will be able to participate in the exercise at their clinic sites, using their own facilities and equipment.

For further information concerning the Public Health Investigation: Infectious Disease Exercise, contact Debbie Nickels, Office of Local and Rural Health, Kansas Department of Health and Environment at 785-291-3457.

Debbie Nickels contributed to the reporting of this story.